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ABSTRACT

The majority of current succession planning practices reflect the viewpoint of only a linear career direction for ambitious people. They are based on the premise that competent people have and want only one career direction--an upwardly mobile one. In today's work force, however, a "bottom-up" process works better in succession planning. This process, which usually focuses no more than 2 years ahead, involves asking employees about their career goals at regular intervals and helping them develop career plans and competencies to meet their goals while allowing the organization to change to meet changing marketplace needs. Career paths need not be only upward and linear, but can involve eight directions, including lateral moves and temporarily moving down to a job with less responsibility in order to learn new skills. In this process, succession planning should resemble more a gridlike pattern than a traditional organization chart. Focusing on replacing incumbents is an old-fashioned idea that presumes that positions will remain the same, an unlikely assumption in a changing world. Succession planning should ensure that teams of people are ready for contingencies, organizational expansion or contraction, entering new markets, and handling changes in the nature of technology. Employees should be educated in career management and skilled in self-reliant practices in their own career development. This model suits the new workplace much better than the older top-down succession plan. (KC)

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Bottom Up Succession Planning Works Better

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

by Paul Stevens, Founder / Director, The Worklife Network

An HRM researcher or postgraduate student looking up succession planning today would be led to believe that it involves identifying and analysing key positions, assessing candidates against job and personal requirements and creating individual development plans for potential successors for more senior responsibilities. Further reading of the literature would encourage creating backup charts, employee profiles and timetables for promotion.

The problem is that this formula does not bear close scrutiny when considering the nature of organisational life today and the practices required to keep a business viable and staffing resources motivated. It shrieks of outdated top down over-control philosophies with scant attention to the danger that if you do not find out the real, rather than the assumed, career expectations of staff you may not have a reliable succession plan. And how will you know those unless you ask them? And ask them again at regular intervals. Just as organisations change, employees also change as they journey through their lives.

The majority of current succession planning practices reflect the viewpoint of only a linear career direction for ambitious people. They are based on the premise that competent people have and want only one career direction—an upwardly mobile one. In fact, every employee has a minimum of eight career direction options at any stage of their working life (Figure 1). Our experiences in conducting 100 career and life planning workshops in the past year indicate that only a minority actually want the career action that requires promotion. But their employers may not have learned this unless a comprehensive career planning support program has been implemented.

Employee participation

Once a career option is actioned and time goes by, an employee will reflect on their work and life experiences and find their primary wants have shifted. Most likely, a different next step option will be chosen than the one previously selected. Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclining is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice.

And why should a succession scheme be limited to planning replacements for higher positions? The need for a more career resilient workforce today means that employees must initiate career changes often through lateral job moves within the same employment environment, seek new learning and extended competencies by changing work speciality streams and thereby enhancing their employability.

Knowing the direction in which a good performing employee is inclining is critical to achieving succession planning as a workable human resource practice.

When employees are stimulated to submit their short- and long-term goals in Career Action Step Proposals (CASP), management has a better idea of who wants what. The top down only system conjectures at the career direction preferences of the indi-

Worklife has been providing in-company career and life planning training since 1983. In the past year nearly 100 workshops have been facilitated. Career development support strategies have been designed in partnership with more than 22 organisations since 1994 for their employees and executive management objectives.

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Figure 1 — Eight Career Action Options

Option		Involves
1. **Enrichment** Develop current job		Considering what job tasks you wish to do more and negotiating with others to take over those which no longer motivate you
2. **Vertical** Seek promotion		Considering what would be the real gain for you in seeking increased responsibilities
3. **Exploration** Test out options		Seeking project work or deputising in another job function to test out how you like it
4. **Lateral** Sideways move		Moving to similar level of job task difficulty but with different job content
5. **Realignment** Moving down		Downshifting to less responsibility for a short- or long-term period
6. **Relocation** Change business unit		Deciding that work of a nature different from your current business unit is more appropriate for your career future
7. **Redirection** Change career field		Changing the career stream or field of work with your current employer
8. **External** Change employer		Deciding that work of a nature different from your current employer is more appropriate for your career future

vidual. These can often be wrong, discovered only when the time comes to act on job succession moves. By assisting employees to decide on and how to communicate their career direction support needs—what they seek and why they believe they merit it—the hazards of succession planning are substantially reduced.

Employees are realistic about the tenuous nature of their continued employment. The recession years taught this lesson. More employees now accept that career protection and increased employability can only be done by themselves. As a consequence, they are eager learners of personal career management practices. They are responsible for initiating requests and need to be skilled in presenting and negotiating their case.

With skilled facilitation, each employee selects and assembles data about: their preferred skills; their career values; their primary wants at the current stage of their career and life; an appraisal of their career action constraints—their belief system; their motivated interests; and concludes by documenting their desired new learning. This is the minimum database for realistic career action planning and exploration of career development where they work.

Employees learn career management skills by participating in workshops and by accessing structured career planning workbooks, employer-sponsored career self-help libraries or comprehensive computer-based career guidance systems (CBCGS) software, such as DISCOVER for Organisations, Career Builder or SIGI PLUS. Further education comes through career coaching discussions with their manager, mentor or HRM staff designated as their career helper.

Once employees' employability confidence and personal career management expertise have been increased, they are less apprehensive about future organisational change. They feel more secure because they have compiled data about themselves which could be used to identify a set of work tasks in any reasonable amount of change which could be forthcoming.

Succession grids, not charts

Succession planning should resemble more a grid-like patterning than a traditional organisation chart. Here, possible successors can be plotted for job content moves that are upwards, sideways or downwards (often a good direction for entry to a new career stream, a new area of expertise growth).

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Focusing on replacing incumbents in positions as they exist today is based on the premise that the organisation will clone what is currently wanted for next month, next year, even the next decade. This approach fails to recognise the rate of change—and its turbulent nature—occurring in the economic and social environment in which organisations are operating. Restructuring has become a way of organisational life as the ebb and flow of business needs and altered strategies recur.

We now have multi-task roles rather than jobs when we go to work.

The assessment of a person's match with their employer should look beyond the position occupied today. The organisation's requirements need to be clarified in terms of competencies, roles, culture and technology. Then, in turn, facilities are required for employees to self-assess whether they are compatible with these requirements. Knowledge and skill to do a job well are not sufficient. Motivation and compatible values and purposes are also required. We now have multi-task roles rather than jobs when we go to work.

The learning journey

Every designated successor would benefit from a learning journey. This means arranging for the candidate to participate in information gathering discussions with the current occupant of the targeted role. The learning journey is a propitious strategy helping both parties by sharing

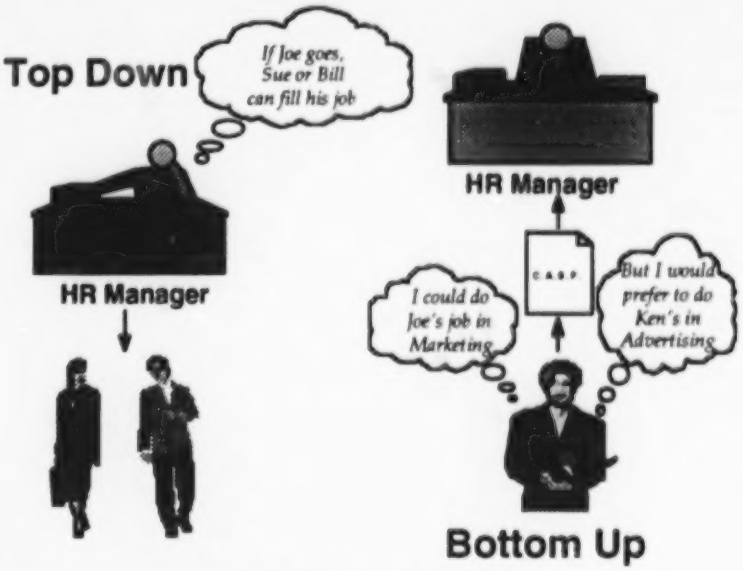
Top Down
If Joe goes, Sue or Bill can fill his job
HR Manager
HR Manager
I could do Joe's job in Marketing
But I would prefer to do Ken's in Advertising
Bottom Up

Figure 2 — Top Down / Bottom Up

the realities of the role rather than career plans being based solely on the publicised descriptions of jobs. A period of intermittent job shadowing could also be scheduled. If the role reality is no longer attractive to the candidate, time is saved by redirecting the succession planning to a more likely candidate. For this to function, succession planning is an open system, not one where the contents are locked in a cupboard by a senior executive.

Managers need to learn about the talent and career action proposals of employees outside their area of accountabilities

Secrecy features in too many succession planning systems. A judgement is made by a senior person and a name entered on a succession chart. Rarely is the individual consulted or informed. Or asked whether it is what they want. Consider the chart in Figure 2.

Workforce responsiveness

What succession planning is really about is ensuring teams of people are in readiness for contingencies, organisational expansion or contraction, for entering new markets, for handling changes in the nature of technology with which the business operates.

A career resilient workforce will adapt readily to changes in structure, command relationships and objectives. To achieve this resiliency, employees need to be educated in the revised definitions of career management and skilled in self-reliant practices in their own career development. This requires commitment to establishing what is the vision of the organisation and communicating it to staff. It requires courage to invite employees to learning events which assist them to review their worklife and plan, on time horizons no further ahead than two years, the type of roles they as individuals want and can show evidence that they merit such appointments.

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The new reality

Succession planning in action is offering a new role to an employee who you know can do two-thirds of the task requirements, as it is naive to expect sustainable high performance if the person knows how to do it all. With no room for new learning, there is self-limiting motivation. Succession planning as a process is holistic in nature. It embraces career development skills building and life management planning for individuals while at the same time linking into the employer's overall business planning practices.

Managers need to learn about the talent and career action proposals of employees outside their area of accountabilities before a total company-wide succession scheme can be effective. There should be more than one party inputting the data on which effective succession planning functions. Limiting succession judgement to a top down secretive process reduces rather than enhances the insurance for the ongoing life of the organisation.

Further Useful Reading

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